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ABSTRACT

To study the role of fathers in the lives of homeless children, a survey was conducted of homeless families in shelters in New York City, capturing profiles of nearly 300 men. The typical father was aged 35, a high school graduate, and not married. The majority spent no time with their homeless children and provided little or no support. In all, two of three fathers provided no financial support, and half of all employed fathers provided no financial support. Over one-third had been violent toward their children or partners, nearly half had spent time in jail, and one of three had a history of substance abuse. Roughly half of these fathers had children with multiple women. Younger men were more likely to be in contact with the mother of their children and were more likely to provide financial support to the family. Forcing fathers back into families may not be the answer to the problems of homeless children. Instead, policymakers must look for nontraditional ways to strengthen nontraditional families. Findings also suggest that intervention may be most successful with younger men. (SLD)

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ED 450 163

MULTIPLE FAMILIES: MULTIPLYING PROBLEMS
A FIRST LOOK AT THE FATHERS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN

A REPORT OF HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS
MAY 2000

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UD033754

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Homes for the Homeless

Multiple Families: Multiplying Problems

A First Look at the Fathers of Homeless Children

FATHER FIGURES

Is there a father in the house? For millions of American children, the answer is no. Numerous studies have shown that children benefit from a two-parent family, yet nearly one in four children in the United States (23%) is being raised without a father present.[1] Among homeless children, *77 percent* grow up in families headed by single mothers.[2]

Absent fathers cannot fulfill important responsibilities, such as supporting their children financially and emotionally. As a result, they fail their children in multiple ways, often causing lasting damage. For example, children in female-headed households are *six times more likely* than those in two-parent families to live below the poverty line.[3] In addition, children who grow up in families without fathers are *three times* more likely to fail at school, develop emotional or behavioral problems, or commit suicide than those with a father in the home.[4]

Who, then, are the fathers of homeless children? What if any role do they play in their children's lives? Previous research on family homelessness has paid little attention to these questions. To find answers, the Institute for Children and Poverty surveyed homeless families residing in transitional shelters in New York City about both present and absent fathers, capturing a profile of nearly three hundred men.

Table 1: A Profile of the Fathers of Homeless Children

Age (Average: 35 years)	**%**
≤ 24 years	15
25-34 years	39
35-44 years	29
≥ 45 years	17
Education Level	**%**
High School Graduate	70
Less than High School	30
Employment Status	**%**
Employed	50
Unemployed	50
Marital Status	**%**
Married to mother of child	11
Not married to mother of child	89
Has children with multiple women:	45%

Average number of children:	3
Homeless children	2
Non-homeless children	1
Relationship with Homeless Children	**%**
Spends time with them	37
Does not spend time with them	63
Provides Financial Support for Homeless Children	**%**
Yes	32
No	68
Social Indicators	**%**
History of Incarceration	44
History of Violence	30
History of Substance Abuse	30

N = 291

The typical father of homeless children is in his mid-thirties, has graduated from high school, has children with multiple women, and neither spends time with nor provides financial support for his homeless children.

Who are the fathers of homeless children?

The typical father is thirty-five years of age, is a high school graduate, and is not married. The majority spend *no* time with their homeless children and provide little or no financial support. One-third (30%) have been violent towards their child or partner, nearly half (44%) have spent time in jail, and one out of three (30%) has a history of substance abuse. (See Table 1)

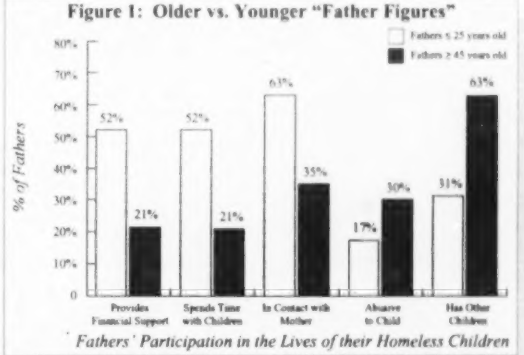
Alarmingly, roughly half of these fathers (45%) have children with multiple women. As a result, they are pulled by the responsibilities of being father figures for multiple families, perhaps one of the primary reasons for their failure in this role.

This study also noted a significant difference between the oldest and youngest fathers. Younger men are twice as likely as older men to be in contact with the mother of their homeless children, as well as to provide financial support for and spend time with their homeless family. Conversely, older men are twice as likely as younger men to have children with other women and have histories of physical abuse.[5] (See Figure 1)

What are the implications for homeless children?

A child's relationship with his or her father has a significant impact on emotional development and well-being. Fathers are important role models, caregivers, and sources of love and security.

Figure 1: Older vs. Younger "Father Figures"



Younger fathers are far more likely to be a part of their homeless children's lives, providing financial support and spending time with their homeless children at more than double the rate of older fathers. Younger men are also fathers to fewer families, and have less history of abuse.

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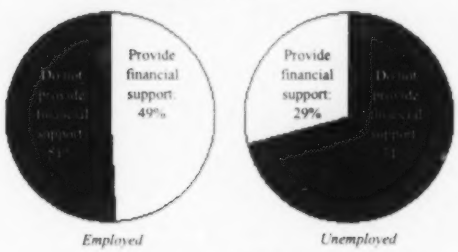
According to this survey nearly two-thirds of fathers (63%) spend *no* time with their homeless children. This was most common among the oldest men: more than three-quarters of men forty-five and older (79%) did not spend time with their homeless children.

Those with histories of either violence or substance abuse were also less likely to visit with their homeless children. While these children are spared the consequences of an abusive father, others suffer from the absence of fathers who could be positive role models, namely those currently employed. Unfortunately, forty-four percent of employed fathers *never* spend time with their homeless children.

In all, two out of three fathers (68%) provide *no* financial aid for their homeless families. Worse still, *half of all employed fathers* fail to provide any child support even though they appear financially able to do so. (See Figure 2) What did emerge as the best predictor of financial support in this study was whether or not fathers spent time with their homeless children: those who did were *ten times* more likely to provide financial support than those who did not.

Figure 2: Fathers and Financial Support



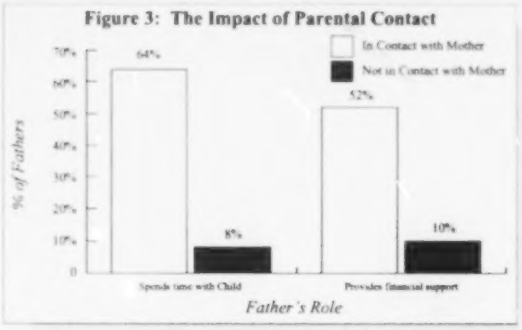
Only 29% of unemployed fathers provide financial support for their homeless children. However, more than half of employed fathers do not provide support, even when apparently financially able to do so.

Multiple Families: Multiple Responsibilities

Having multiple families pulls fathers in several directions at once and inevitably away from their homeless families. As seen earlier, *nearly half* of fathers in this study have children with more than one woman. Not surprisingly, these men are nearly twice as likely to sever ties with the mother of their homeless children. In all, roughly half of fathers (48%) are no longer in contact with these women.

Men who have lost touch are much less likely to be involved in their homeless children's lives. In fact, fathers still in contact are *eight times more likely* to spend time with these children (64% vs. 8%) and *five times more likely* to provide financial support (52% vs. 10%) than fathers no longer in contact. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3: The Impact of Parental Contact



Fathers who remain in contact with the mother of their homeless children are eight times more likely to spend time with their homeless children and five times more likely to provide financial support.

Consequences

The traditional concept of family–a two-parent nuclear unit with an active, responsible father figure–is not the tradition for homeless households. Instead, almost half of the fathers of homeless children are actually fathers to multiple families. Faced with the daunting responsibility of caring for children in *as many as three different family units*, many of these men fail to fulfill their financial and emotional obligations. Consequently, most of these children grow up without a father figure, an essential mentor, in their lives.

Yet is forcing these fathers back into families the answer? Perhaps not. First, which family should they be responsible for, one in particular or all? Second, roughly half of these men are unemployed or have spent time in jail; one-third have histories of violence or substance abuse. Are these the role models their children need?

Instead, elected officials and policy makers must look for non-traditional ways to strengthen non-traditional families. The findings in this report suggest that intervention may be most successful with younger men, who are more likely to emotionally and financially support their homeless children. In other cases, mentor programs which link non-biological "father figures" with homeless children may be more appropriate. Either way, from this preliminary analysis it is clear that the fathers of homeless children face multiple obstacles to family life. However, the solutions are not yet as obvious; finding them will require further research.

Footnotes

1. US Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, "Table A. Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years: March 1998."
2. Homes for the Homeless, *Ten Cities: A Snapshot of Family Homelessness Across America*. New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998.
3. US Bureau of the Census, "Poverty by Selected Characteristics: 1989, 1997, and 1998."
4. Wade Horn, *You've Come a Long Way, Daddy*. Policy Review, 1997.
5. Youngest and oldest men are not extreme cases: men under thirty-five are more likely to provide financial support as well as be in contact and spend time with their homeless families; men over thirty-five are more likely to have histories of abuse and have children with other women.

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